A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 26

Each day, the noose slipped tighter around Kashyyyk. Tholatin was the last system in the Mytaranor sector that was still completely held by the Republic, and today it would fall. "Sir, there's an unusually large Star Destroyer in the Republic fleet," the command droid OOM-27 reported.

"On screen," Kronaak ordered.

The ship was larger than a *Venator*, by several hundred meters. It was sleek, dagger-like; its uninterrupted lines were aggressively Kuati. A single tower rose out of the dorsal superstructure, widening out like symmetrical hammer's head, and two prominent sensor domes sat upon each end.

"So, *Imperator,* we meet at last!" said Kronaak, clicking his mandibles.

"We've never fought one of these before," OOM-27 said.

"No, we haven't. Tell our lovely ladies to form up, we're going in."

Charonia, *Maira*, *Hurricane, Tempest, Moonraker,* and *Ardent*, Kronaak's droid-brained *Recusant* escorts, took their positions on the flanks of battleship *Aethra.* The *Lucrehulk* dwarfed any other ship in the fleet, but the *Imperator* dwarfed everything but *Aethra*.

"Sir, the *Imperator*'s acceleration is several orders of magnitude greater than ours," OOM-27 said. "If she runs, we'll never catch her."

"Did you know our *Lucrehulk*s can sustain maximum acceleration for two hundred and thirty hours before running out of fuel?" asked Kronaak.

"Yes sir, it's in the Trade Federation manual," 27 said.

"These ships were built for operating efficiently and cheaply, not with peak performance in mind," Kronaak said. "How long do you think that *Imperator* can accelerate for?"

"Not as long, sir?" the droid guessed.

"Correct. And how much fuel do you think will reach the Republic fleets at Kashyyyk before we trap them there?"

"Not much, sir."

"I *want* them to run! They are playing straight into my claws." Kronaak snapped a claw shut under the droid's snout to make his point. "Gunnery crews, get a firing solution on that Star Destroyer!"

The *Imperator* was drawing closer, her freshly-applied white hull paint and red markings gleaming in the starlight. This ship must been deployed straight form the shipyards. "Sir, we have a firing solution," a droid reported.

Kronaak pointed his walking stick at the ship. "Fire."

The turbolasers on the arc of the battleship facing forward opened up, a hail of red bolts lighting up the deflector shields of the Star Destroyer. The six *Recusants* started shooting too, the combined firepower of their heavy guns would have been enough to take on a *Venator*, but not this new ship. On came the *Imperator,* blasting away at them in turn. *Green, not blue,* Kronaak thought, watching the lasers stream in. No wonder the Republic was taking so long to get these things into battle, they had an entirely new weapons suite.

The *Imperator* drew closer, soaking up everything that came at it. *Aethra*'s shields were holding, but had taken a substantial beating. Then, the two ships were at a broadside as they passed. Kronaak's ship gave it everything she had, and so did the Republic ship. Both passed, shields flickering, but holding. A sick feeling churned in Kronaak's gut as he checked the readouts around him. *That one Star Destroyer did more to our shields than even two* Venator*s could have in the same time.*

The accursed Star Destroyer began swinging around for another pass. One super ship wasn't going to turn the tide of this battle, though. Khan's fleet was jumping in, more ships by the second, and the Republic was making for the only guaranteed exit to semi-friendly space they now had: Kashyyyk. One brave group of ships were heading off in another direction, to try a seldom-used and treacherous hyperlane out of the system that would take them through a nebula full of blue hypergiant stars. It'd take them nine days to traverse that route safely, less if they risked losing ships to the hypergiants' gravity wells.

Imperator *or not, we've got you just where we want you,* Kronaak thought, as the Star Destroyer came about. This time, the ship lost its own shields, but took *Aethra*'s to sixty percent. Three *Imperator*s would have been enough to take down *Aethra*'s shields in only a few minutes.

"The Republic is retreating, sir," OOM-27 announced.

"Good, good," Kronaak said. "Run a full analysis on that engagement and send it to Hithlu, Tuuk, and Grievous. We have a very big problem on the horizon."

The smell of bacta filled Esera's nose, an recycled air too. She blinked in the red light of *Scimitar*'s cabin. "How long was I out?" she asked to no one. Something flashed on the ship's display screen. "Nineteen hours, wow." Esera became aware of a dull ache across her front, the after-effects of the lightsaber slash she'd taken. When she looked down, she realized she had nothing on above her waist, except for three bacta patches, tracing a curved line from her lower left ribs, up between her breasts, and then over her heart. *Too close,* she thought. A few centimeters to either side and she would have lost something of importance to her; a few centimeters deeper and she would have been killed instantly. One outcome was much worse than the other, but all things considered, she'd gotten off as lightly as possible from that encounter.

Aspar's parting gift would leave a nasty scar, no matter what, though. Esera imagined explaining that to someone, and then wondered why she'd ever be in a position to explain such a scar to anyone, doctors excluded. Who'd put the bacta patches on, anyway? It hadn't been her...

"R8? Did you do this?" she asked.

Silence. Esera looked, R8 wasn't up here. *Maybe he went down to the other deck,* she thought. Between the fact that Aspar's saber had missed her heart by centimeters, and the ever-present sense of the dark side on this ship, Esera felt uneasy. But since she was alone with a droid, there was no reason to be cautious, so she took the lift down to the first deck. Esera checked her wound in the tiny washroom's mirror, realizing the bacta patches had been applied expertly. Already she had been healed enough to move around and stretch without too much trouble. She didn't notice the dark hummock sitting by the maintenance hatch until she was on her way out.

"What the hell..." Esera began to say.

The hummock moved, two green glowing eyes stared up at her, and she shrieked in surprise, her hand flying to her hip for a lightsaber that she'd left up on the flight deck. The dark shape rose, taller and taller, until it nearly touched the ceiling, it whined and hissed as it moved. It was a dark side apparition, it had to be! What Sith sorcery was this? Esera felt nothing but the dark side in here-

"So, you're the one that landed in my garden."

Esera froze. Of all the words she expected to hear from a Sith monster, *garden* was not one of them. "What are you?" she asked.

"The one who saved your life. After you landed in my garden."

"Ah." Esera blinked. "Oh! You must be the one who-" It hit her that this voice was deep and masculine-sounding, though metallic and distorted. Esera's arms flew over her chest.

"Oh, please," snorted the creature, turning away to face a bulkhead. "I'm too old to even be interested in women of my own kind, let alone hairy, oily, alien ones. I am a healer, not a perverted xenophile."

"Who are you calling hairy and oily!?"

"I am revolted by your appearance. Your skin is soaked in oils seeping from open pores and covered tiny transparent hairs, I might have vomited if I wasn't stuck in this poisonous atmosphere of your ship. I would ask you to put your clothes back on, but they were damaged in my efforts to save your life," said whomever she was talking to, as he still faced the wall. "Now, if it pleases you, might I know to whom it is I speak to?"

"Esera," she said, mustering what dignity she could. "Esera Komara. Captain Esera Komara! Confederate Navy Intelligence! Who are you?"

"Harak Murshida," said her apparent savior, with a bow. Again, Esera heard the whine and hiss sounds. "Former chaplain of the Skako Cyber-Guard. Now, but a humble exile, serving as a mystic and healer to this community."

Skakoan, Esera thought. That explained a lot about him, such as the disdain for her alien traits and the claim of poisonous oxygen. *Great, of all the aliens to save me, it's a Skakoan. And what the hell is the Cyber-Guard?*

"Alright, Murshida," Esera said, side-stepping to the bunk-bay she'd thrown her suitcase full of clothes in. "First, thank you for saving my life and patching me up. Second, you and I are on the same side in this war, so there's no need to get excited. We're all friends here."

"What war?" asked Murshida. She had to take a moment to process that question.

"What... war?" Esera echoed.

"You'll have to forgive me, Captain Komara. I don't even know what species you are, nor was I aware of any war, or a confederation of any kind," said Murshida. "I would also like to repeat I am stuck in here and have thirty minutes of air left. Your ship has no control panel for the door, it let me in but won't let me out."

"Uh..." She was at a loss for words. *How long has this guy been... wherever I am? How does he not know what a Human is?* "Let me get dressed, then I think we need to have a talk. You've missed a few things."

Palsaang had become Grievous's temporary headquarters on Kashyyyk, while he waited for Quinlan Vos to strike. The Wookiees in the main tree had been taken an offer to evacuate to another island in the archipelago, where no fighting was taking place. For the past few days, Grievous had been focusing on his offensive to Kachirho. There were sixty kilometers of dense woodland between the two cities, each being on opposite coasts of the same island. A direct route would have taken them across the island's lagoon, like the droid army had taken before. This time, Grievous was trying something new.

Everything started off just fine. The main thrust of the droid army had engaged the Republic and the Wookiees halfway across the island. Whatever idiot was in charge of strategy over there had actually sent his forces to do battle in the woods than stay in their defensible cities. In fact, they might have been so stupid that they'd gone around the circle and actually become smart. Grievous had not anticipated the battle taking place so far from Kachirho. He'd wanted more time for his flanking groups to get into position.

Now, Grievous ran the risk of having his plan uncovered. He decided it was time to bring in some more help. A certain super tactical droid's fleet had entered Kashyyyk's system this morning. "Khan," Grievous said via hologram, "get down here. I have a job for you."

The droid arrived promptly. "I have not been down a gravity well in seven months, General," he said. "It is unclear to me how I can serve you here. My specialization is in astronautical warfare."

"That is of no consequence." Grievous waved his hand. "Today your specialization is in terrestrial warfare."

"Very well, sir." The super tactical droid clasped his hands behind his back, and stood at attention before the holomap of the island. "I have analyzed your attack plan. The Republic's premature engagement has jeopardized its chances of success."

"Correct," Grievous said. "You are a raider, Khan. I need someone to plan a raid on their supply lines, behind the front, and slow them down."

"I am capable of this," said Khan. "They cannot fight without ammunition or fuel. I would also like to bring attention to the poetic nature of our situation, sir. Kashyyyk is the linchpin of our operation to encircle and destroy an enemy weakened by lack of supply. Now we are on Kashyyyk, engaging in an operation to encircle and destroy an enemy we will attempt to weaken by lack of supply."

"That is apparent," Grievous said. "See to your mission. And be warned, the Jedi Master Quinlan Vos has sworn to kill me. He will be coming."

"He too shall be destroyed."

Once dressed and armed, Esera returned to her Skakoan guest. Mindful of his limited methane supply, Esera decided to give him only a quick rundown on the Separatist Crisis, Clone War, and the general political-military situation. "I shouldn't be surprised that they've gone and ruined everything," sighed Murshida. "But, I will be grateful. Destiny has given me chance to meet a Human at last. I have always wondered what you looked like. I was not expecting your kind to be so oily, it is off-putting to see such a primitive feature in such an advanced race."

"You... didn't know?" asked Esera, choosing to ignore the Skakoan's obsession with the natural oils found on Human skin that waterproofed it. Most mammalian lifeforms had some similar trait, but Skakoans must not have had need. *Maybe Skako doesn't have rain?*

"We have little regard for aliens on Skako," Murshida said. "Education on them is only offered to specialists looking to travel off-world. I never sought this, but circumstances change."

"Apparently," said Esera.

"So, my people have joined this Confederacy of Independent Systems in its war against the Galactic Republic... Thirty-five years ago, I would have been overjoyed at the chance to see action. But now, decidedly less so!"

"I feel the same way," Esera said. "Except, I haven't even been around thirty-five years." She tried to open *Scimitar*, but the ship was reluctant. "Come on, what are you waiting for?" Esera gave the lock mechanism a push through the Force, and at last, the clamshell doors hissed open. A wall of air slammed into Esera, howling into the ship, pushing her up against the bulkhead. *A storm?* No, the wind was gone as soon as it came. It felt like something was pressing on her all around, her ears were trying to pop too. The planet's atmosphere was merely high pressure.

"Do you always have to argue with this ship?" asked Murshida.

"She's new to me," Esera said.

"She's cursed," said the Skakoan. Esera turned to him, wondering if she'd heard him right. "There is a dark and wicked presence in this ship. I can feel it all around me."

"Really?" asked Esera, narrowing her eyes.

"Yes," Murshida said. "I would like to perform an exorcism when time allows."

"Uh... feel free," said Esera. *What's going on here?* she wondered. *A Skakoan talking about exorcisms? He did say he was a chaplain. Are they religious? What gave him the idea Scimitar is cursed? How did he sense that?*

Once outside the ship, Esera could feel Murshida's presence in the Force. The sun was setting, or rising, Esera wasn't sure, but she finally got a good look at her savior. The Skakoan was robed in cloth that had once been some shade of red, but was now so worn and stained that it seemed closer to brown than anything else. She caught hints of gleaming metal as he moved, and realized those whines and hisses had to be coming from his pressure suit. He wore a hood over his head, and his goggles glowed with green light from beneath the cowl. The Skakoan was tall, at least a head and a half taller than her, nearly Grievous-sized. *Why is everyone in the Galaxy bigger than me?* Esera wondered.

"There you are!" Esera said, when she saw R8 trying to dig one of the landing gear struts out of the soft earth it had sunk into. *Scimitar* really had touched down in Murshida's garden, there were strange, dull green-grey plants arranged neatly in rows, looking like little stars from their five-fold symmetry. R8 chirped, spinning his head around to look at her.

"Your droid has been diligent," Murshida said.

"He usually is."

Not far off was another starship, or what had once been a starship. The original design was obscure, and decades of weathering and modification had made it even harder to identify. The ship was half-buried in the ground, dirt had piled up all around it, anchored in place by tufts of long gray grass and ruffly-leaved shrubberies, five blades or five leaves to a stem. An airlock seemed to serve as a front door, with an arch of scrap metal built around it, hosting a vine spiraling around it. The vine sprouted leaves in sets of five. *It's all about the number five, here...*

"Sorry about the landing, I wasn't awake for it," Esera said. "I'm not even sure where I am. The last thing I remember was making the jump to hyperspace."

"Ah, location, that is a good question. All I can tell you is that you're in the Iskin sector, rimward of the Remmon Nebula. I found this planet by accident. I was guided here after a deep meditation," said Murshida.

"I didn't know Skakoans meditated..."

"I didn't know Humans used gardens as landing pads." Murshida stared at her pointedly, and Esera opened her mouth to reply. After a moment, it occurred to her what Murshida was getting at.

"Well, there's billions of you, so I guess if it can be done, one of you has done it," Esera muttered. "I'll move my ship in a bit, once I'm sure everything's working."

The Skakoan nodded. "I am going to refill my air," he said. "I won't be long."

He ducked into his airlock, and vanished inside his ship. Esera was starting to get used to the high pressure air. In fact, she was sure she could hardly feel it. She walked around *Scimitar* to get her bearings. They had landed on a ridge, which looked over a valley on either side, more ridges rose in the twilight, and beyond them, yet more ridges and valleys. The land looked bleak and dreary, the dirt and rock was tan while the plants were sickly pale green at best, slate gray at worst. But Esera was sure she saw fires flickering far in the distance, and smoke rising, so they weren't alone on this planet. Not far down the ridge was a stone building of some sorts, clearly hand-made from interlocking pieces of rock and not much else.

But as the sun set behind the furthest ridge, something strange began to happen. There were more lights than just the fires. Far more lights. They were faint at first, competing against the last rays of the departing sun, but as twilight rose and darkness fell, the valleys lit up, filled with as many stars as the sky above. Esera gasped as the shadows spread across the valley floor, and in their wake, the stars of the earth came to life. She looked behind her, at Murshida's garden, and saw that the leaves of the plants were dotted in little lights, and the tip of every blade of clump-grass had a bead of light glowing on top.

"It's beautiful," Esera murmured to herself, as the living Force swelled around her. The planet, nearly lifeless just a few minutes ago, blazed in the Force as night fell. This world was waking up. Esera had trusted in the Force to guide her away from Naboo, and this is where it had taken her. Could she be surprised that the she too had been guided here unconsciously? A sea of stars stretched out below her, and above. Where one horizon ended and the other began, she could not say. The only sign that she was not floating in deep space were the tiny fire lights in the valley.

"I have spent half my life here, and I still find joy in this, every night," Murshida said, emerging from his ship-home.

"This is amazing," Esera said. The beauty, the magnificence, the *light* and the *life* – it was almost too much to bear. She couldn't stop smiling, her eyes watered, she swayed on her feet. The Skakoan shifted and looked at her. "I'm- I'm fine," Esera said, her words slurring together. When had that black shadow started constricting her vision? "I think I'm fine?"

"No, you are not," Murshida said. He strode over to her, and picked her up by her shoulders effortlessly. "Back into your ship, Human."

Scimitar closed the doors and ramp behind them, and the pressure returned to normal. Within minutes, Esera was back to normal too. "What was that?" she asked, shaking her head. "It was, it was like..." A sick feeling washed over her, as she recalled her dinner with King Atai. "It was like being drunk, almost."

"The change in air pressure interfered with your body chemistry, I believe," the Skakoan said.

"Nitrogen narcosis!" Esera remembered her dive training at the Temple. "It was nitrogen narcosis. The pressure out there was so high that nitrogen gas particles were... uh... well, they do something to our nervous system, I didn't understand it back then. It messes us up after a certain amount of pressure. I don't think I should go out there without a pressure suit again, even though it's perfectly breathable for me."

"We're not so different, you and I," Murshida remarked.

The two of them went up to the flight deck, as Esera wanted to see the stars of the earth again. "Is it some kind of bio-luminescence?" she wondered.

"Yes," said Murshida. "Every plant here does it. There are creatures that fly through the air, attracted to light, they brush over the plants and pollinate them."

"Neat." Esera squinted, trying to see any shapes moving over the stars. She wished the dark side presence in *Scimitar* wasn't so overpowering. Outside, the Force was strong, but in here, there was nothing but a dreadful feeling of hatred and anger. "We're going to have to do something about you, *Scimitar*," she said.

"You feel the curse too?" asked Murshida.

"I do. Very strongly. This ship once belonged to an evil man. I don't even want to think about what he might have done in here," Esera said.

"*Scimitar* is an ugly name," Murshida said. "You should change it."

"It's crossed my mind."

Down behind the maintenance hatch was a crawl-way that led to the cargo hold, only a meter high from floor to ceiling. There, Esera found a pressure suit for someone much taller and bigger than her. It fit horribly, but it let her go outside without suffering the narcosis. The Skakoan laughed when he saw her shuffling around in it, and shook his head. "Shut up," Esera said.

"You look like a child in that!"

Time for a change of subject. "Who lives out there?" asked Esera, pointing at the fires.

"The locals," said Murshida. "They are a primitive people. Their most advanced technologies are chemically-propelled missiles and hydro-mechanical mills. I have never seen such a mill, the closest one is just out of my safe range of movement. I am tied to my home, there is no other source of air for me here."

"Odd place to choose for an exile," Esera said.

"A vision guided me to this planet, Captain Komara," Murshida said, as she stared up into the stars. "I could not refuse this divine mandate. Providence arranged for me to be here for a reason, so here I have dwelt, in hardship and poverty, through disaster and catastrophe. I have learned much in my time here, and I am grateful for it. A primitive people they are, out there, but wise and righteous. Long have I studied with them. So long, now, that these days *I* teach *them*!"

"You went native, huh?" asked Esera, with a smirk. The Skakoans were notoriously xenophobic, the notion that one had assimilated into a primitive culture amused her.

"You could say that." Murshida nodded. "My heart was hard and cold, once, but I have grown strong in faith enough to let it soften and warm. I owe much to this place and its people."

"I never knew Skakoans were a spiritual race..."

"Oh, we are," said Murshida, "we are. I got too radical in my interpretations of some things, they exiled me. Rightly so, I was a troublemaker back then. My time here has changed me greatly. For the first time, my eyes were opened. Can you feel it, Komara? Can you cast your spirit out, and feel the life-energy of this place? Can you see what I see?"

"What do you see?" asked Esera. The Force was rising in the Skakoan, something Esera had never considered possible before. Was this hermit aware of the power stirring within him?

"I see beauty. A window into a higher world. The mark of the divine, etched into the greatest star and the smallest grain. The beauty of balance in creation. No death without life, no sadness without joy, no grief without love. We cannot understand without this balance. It cannot be done. Understanding the self leads to understanding the world, and understanding the world leads to understanding the divine. And to understand the divine, we must realize the primal truth of creation: that is that this flesh, this bone," Murshida clenched his gauntleted fist, servos whining, "is not all that we are! These plants are not just leaves and stems! This earth is not just dirt and rock! That ship is not just metal and plastic! There is something else, something more, binding this all together. I have seen it, I have *felt* it! It is here now, in this very moment. In my soul, I know this is the truth. It was written: *the whole is more than the sum of its parts*."

He feels the Force, Esera thought. *He's touched it. Maybe just for a moment, but he knows now.* A smile broke out on her face. It had been a long time since she spoke to someone who had experienced the Force and wasn't trying to hurt her.

"I think I see what you're getting at," Esera said, not wishing yet to give away she had been a Jedi Knight. "So, how do you explain the curse on my ship?"

"It is out of balance," Murshida said. "In my mediations, I have come to realize there are two sides to this energy. There is the natural order, and there is the corruption. From death, flows life, and from life, flows death. This is the natural order. But the corruption... It festers and rots, giving birth to nothing, it consumes and destroys. From this corruption, there can only ever be death. It is an abomination that would destroy all of creation if allowed to. And our hearts are always vulnerable to this corruption. It would take root there, if we but let it."

Esera stood in silent surprise. It was a take on the dark side she'd never heard before. In the Temple, she had been told that the dark side flowed from attachment, from worldly desire, from emotion, from the self. Her master had never quite agreed with that, but it was always something he said he'd tell her about when she was older. And when Esera had become older, he gone and gotten killed. A sharp pang of loss shot through her heart at the memory, and she shoved it out of her mind before she could dwell on it.

"Interesting," said Esera. "So my ship is out of balance with this universal energy, this... Force, you might call it?"

"Yes," Murshida said, nodding again. "Your ship is out of balance with this *force*, as you say."

"You really sound like a Jedi!"

"A Jedi?" The Skakoan tilted his head in thought. "The Jedi are sorcerers, masters of powerful magics. I am but a unlearned mystic and common healer, seeking enlightenment. We have little in common."

Sorcerers? Is that what Skakoans think we are? Again and again, Esera was bemused by what the rest of the Galaxy thought the Jedi were. "I think you have more in common with the Jedi than you know," Esera said.

"Perhaps, I have never met one," said Murshida. He looked up, at a foreign constellation Esera would never know. "Forgive an old man his ramblings, I have never been able to voice these ideas in the common tongue before."

"You made sense to me."

"Good, good... I must take my leave now, Captain Komara. My students should be arriving soon." The Skakoan pointed up at the stone building further along the ridge. "There is much to teach and much to learn."

"I understand. I'll get to work at moving my ship."

After Murshida was gone, Esera noticed something. A red light, amongst the clear white of the land and sky. A red, blinking light, right on the edge of *Scimitar*'s silhouette. Esera approached the hull, and her worst fears were confirmed: it was a standard Jedi tracking device. Aspar and his clones would be coming here. The only question was when.

Two dozen Tsmeu-6 wheelbikes spooled their motors up in the darkness of Kashyyyk's night. "Are you sure this is wise, General?" Khan asked, from the seat of his wheelbike.

"I am seeing to this personally," Grievous said. He was positioned at the front of the two-abreast column of bikes, lined up and ready to move out. "It is your safety I should be worried for."

"I am quite capable of self-defense," said the super tactical droid. "I too must see to this personally. This may be my only chance to wage war upon land."

"It's settled then. Try to keep up." Grievous stomped down on the throttle, and shot off into the night, letting his infrared lamp and thermal vision lead the way. Two magnaguards on their own bikes flanked him, with Khan and the BX-series commando droids following along. The use of a super tactical droid on the front line was questionable, but as Khan pointed out, they were not going to the front lines, they were going behind them. The droid was adamant he take part, and Grievous was willing to risk losing such an asset just to see *why*. If a droid had found a warrior's spirit, then Grievous was not going to deny him a chance to fight with his own two hands.

Also accompanying them was a platoon of GATs. The Ground Armored Tank hadn't lived up to its name, it neither touched the ground nor was its armor proofed against anything bigger than light vehicle-mounted blasters. Most had ended up as scouts and raiders in the droid armies, which is exactly what Grievous had in mind for them here. Repulsorlifts weren't ideal for Kashyyyk, but with enough speed, that handicap could be overcome. The GAT had the speed to simply jump over the porous obstacles that would impede an AAT or MTT. And while the GAT wasn't particularly durable, it did have the firepower to deal with any repulsorlift tanks they encountered in this raid.

Grievous hurtled through the dense woodland in his bike, seamlessly switching from wheeled mode to walking mode, leaping over massive fallen worshyr tree trunks and crashing through the underbrush. It would be a wonder if the entire planet didn't hear their approach, as twenty three other wheelbikes followed his lead, with the GATs roaring behind them, their photoceptors glowing red in the gloom.

For two hours, the column smashed its way through the Kashyyyk forest, before taking a sharp turn. Grievous knew exactly where he was going, the spy satellites had indicated a Republic supply convoy left Kachirho at dusk. The raiders would intercept them on the road, halfway to their destination, as far from Kachirho or the front lines as they could be. After another hour of driving, Grievous brought his wheelbike sliding to a stop, holding up a hand out of habit even as he sent the stop order over the wireless.

All that broke the silence of the night were the idling engines of the wheelbikes and tanks, which soon all switched off. They were grouped up behind low ridge, two hundred meters beyond which was the road the Republic had widened for their huge walkers and landbarges loaded with food, fuel, ammunition, and medicine. Grievous could hear the tell-tale thumping of the walkers already, as they ambled down the road, unaware of the ambush. The dense canopy had masked their approach from above, the ridge and worshyr trees had masked them from the ground.

"You two, take the head vehicle," Grievous ordered to some of the commando droids. "You two, take the rear vehicle. Simultaneous strikes, aim for the legs of the walkers."

"Roger roger," acknowledged the droids, dismounting their bikes and rushing off into the night with their rocket launchers.

"Tanks, engage their escort vehicles from the ridge, reposition after every shot," said Grievous. The eyes of the GATs blinked, their guns swiveled up and down in salute. "Khan, the rest of you, follow me and prepare your mines." The droids had all the data they needed to know about the weak points of the Republic walkers. They waited silently, until the commandos sent ahead shot their rockets. Grievous could see through their eyes – the lead and rear walkers were crippled, the convoy slamming to a halt as chaos erupted and blue blaster bolts began spraying at every shadow.

"Attack!" Grievous ordered, and the wheelbikes and GATs roared to life. The tanks only climbed up to the top of the ridge, and began taking shots at the TX-130s and AT-RTs in the convoy. Grievous and his raiders surged forward through the trees, flying out of the foliage and onto the road, lit only by fires of explosions and the floodlights of the walkers.

They rode down the length of the column, Grievous and the magnaguards blasting any clone troopers and Wookiees they saw, setting the landbarges full of supplies on fire. Behind them, the commando droids tossed their magnetic mines onto the undersides of the walkers, beneath the engines that drove the legs and onto the fuel tanks. Detonations followed in their wake, at the AT-TEs and AT-OTs collapsed in flames. A few of the commando droids were throwing thermal detonators into the open tops of the AT-OTs. The ball-mounted laser cannons tracked the riders and took whatever shots they could, but the wheelbikes were blazingly fast.

Then, the behemoth emerged from the smoke and shadows. "Juggernaut!" Grievous announced to his troops. "Split up!"

The ten-wheeled beast rolled forward, its turrets blasting away at the pests beneath it. The wheelbikes parted like water around a stone, but the Juggernaut screeched to a halt, and reversed its course instantly, dodging burning walkers and repulsor-sleds and landbarges with ease.

"Sir, this machine is not supposed to be here," Khan said over the roar of engines and gunfire.

"No, it's not," Grievous agreed. "But here it is! You wanted a fight, Khan, you've got one!"

One by one, the Juggernaut and surviving walkers picked off the commando droids. Grievous ordered them to retreat, he'd deal with the monster tank. The Juggernaut was so big, so heavy, and had so much momentum that it was able to crash through every obstacle Grievous put between him and it. One of the magnaguards went flying into the air as his wheelbike was blown in two. "Recover him and get back to Palsaang!" Grievous told his remaining guard.

Now, he was alone against the Juggernaut. Grievous turned deeper into the woods, and sent his wheelbike screaming up the trunk of one of the great worshyr trees. He looked back, and saw that he was in fact not alone. Khan was right behind him, following him into the vertical without a hint of hesitation.

They were going too fast to communicate with spoken word, Grievous beamed a message straight to the droid: *What are you still doing here?*

Khan answered: *You told me to keep up, sir. I am keeping up.*

If Grievous had a mouth, he would have grinned, and he kicked the wheelbike into overdrive as the underside of a branch approached. Centrifugal force kept the wheelbike anchored to the tree, defying gravity, as it sped along the arc of the trunk and branch. Below, the Juggernaut blazed onward. Grievous slowed his machine until gravity took him into freefall, and Khan still followed. They deployed the legs on the wheelbikes, and landed right on top of the Juggernaut.

The heavy repeater of the rear turret whipped around to face them, but Grievous's wheelbike was already leaping towards it. He ignited a lightsaber and chopped through all six barrels of the cannon. In the middle of the tank, Khan had simply smashed his wheelbike into the other turret, and was using its legs' gripping claws to tear the thing off its mount.

"No one's ever followed me on that maneuver," Grievous said.

"I am not no one," said Khan.

"Stay up here and cover me."

"Yes, sir."

The Juggernaut was trying to shake them off, swinging left and right, slamming on the brakes, speeding up, but they were never going to shake Khan or the wheelbikes off, they'd magnetized to the hull. Grievous took out all four of his lightsabers, and began drilling a hole though the armor. For an ordinary person, melting through the armor of the Juggernaut would have taken minutes, but Grievous was a cyborg, he cut his way through within thirty seconds.

Slaughtering his way to the main drive shaft was easy, he even used one of the clones' own detonators to disable the Juggernaut, which lurched and slowed as it lost power to the wheels. Grievous jumped up through the three levels of the tank, but not before a clone with an EMP grenade launcher managed to catch one of his legs in its blast. Grievous smashed a fist through his helmet's visor as repayment.

Up on the roof, Khan and his own wheelbike were surrounded by fallen clones. *Why didn't I just wait for them to open a hatch for me?* he wondered. Grievous had very little patience, even he couldn't deny that.

"Impressive," Khan said. "My analysis of the effectiveness of frontal leadership has proven accurate."

"I do everything myself in this army," Grievous sighed. "Back to base!" The two blasted off on their wheelbikes, through the woods, past the wrecked convoy, and towards Palsaang. In the morning, the extent of the damage they'd done became clear as the Republic counter-offensive ground to a halt. As for Grievous, pleasant memories of his youth filled his mind and mixed with last night's raid. Whether it was huk or clones burning, he didn't care, it felt good.

"That is one gutsy droid," Director Orlok said, raising a glass of brandy to the holotank, where blurry images of Grievous on some kind of wheeled machine were being shown. "I'd like to see Amedda down in the muck on Kashyyyk."

"Wouldn't we all?" Tarkin asked. Once again, the two men found themselves in a certain exclusive upper-class establishment, where discretion ruled and no questions were asked. Orlok was not a dumb man, he knew where the winds were blowing, and he wanted to be sure he was on Tarkin's side for days to come. And Tarkin could use a man of Orlok's talents in his pocket. Not to mention, he was also the Director of Republic Intelligence making him a must-have ally anyway.

"How are things in the Senate? I heard the Kuatis are holding their next batch of *Imperator*s for themselves, and refusing to turn them over to the Navy," said Orlok.

"It's caused quite a bit of drama. If Kuat can requisition the materiel they've built, then all the other industrial worlds are wanting to do the same. That Separatist battleship is still flying around causing a nuisance, they're terrified of it," Tarkin said. "Every senator in that building is trying to call back fleets to defend their own world at the expense of all others. These deep raids in the last three months have done more for the Separatist cause than any victory they've won since Duro."

"That won't be the case for long," Orlok sighed. He pushed a holoprojector across the table, and up sprang a starmap of the Mytaranor sector. Every system was Separatist blue, except Kashyyyk, and Torn Station. "Most of the top Separatist brass are in or around the Kashyyyk system. Grievous, Hithlu, Helnurath, Kronaak, Khan-"

"Are all their names supposed to start with the same letters?" interrupted Tarkin. He put a hand on his chin. "It is confusing, keeping them all straight."

"I wouldn't put it past Grievous to do that. Anyways, Eemon's ships are escorting in freighter and tanker convoys, Tuuk was confirmed at Boz Pity recently, Tonith hasn't left Mygeeto, and Cartroll is staying put at Sluis Van. There's someone missing from all this."

"Khwaramenes," said Tarkin. Another name that started with the letter *kril*. "That Givin navigator who dropped those carriers into low Kuat orbit."

"That's the one. Several thousand Separatist ships are still unaccounted for. I'm willing to bet my eldest daughter's entire university fund that Khwaramenes is going to close the encirclement we've blundered into at Kashyyyk, one way or another." Orlok moved his sausage-like fingers though the starmap, spreading the Separatist blue to Torn Station. "We'll be trapped there. There's no known way out of the Kashyyyk system remaining if they somehow take Torn Station. The Wookiees have kept the minor hyperlanes into their system a secret, so their enemies can't sneak up on them. If anyone's going to escape, we're going to need their help."

Tarkin shook his head, and took a sip of his own brandy. "This is going to be the blunder of the century, Director. I take it you've given your analysis to high command?"

"They won't listen. The siren-song of the decisive battle is too strong." Orlok waved his hand. "The popular idea is that Grievous is just going to keep dumping ships into the system until he's got no reserves left, hoping he can beat our fleets with brute force. Wishful thinking! The Separatists haven't had any reinforcements since Khan and Kronaak showed up. There's nothing more coming, except Khwaramenes. And mark my words, when he shows up, and he will, at Torn Station, it's over."

"I told them we should retreat," Tarkin said. "If they won't listen to me, they certainly won't listen to you."

"Numbers are all they can think in. The Separatists have just under forty thousand ships in the sector, we have over twenty-five thousand, most of the 11th Fleet, 4th Fleet, and a number of task forces from other fleets. But as our ships are worth three of theirs each, they think the situation is us having them outgunned two to one. None of that's going to matter once our fuel is gone." Orlok covered his face with his hands. "This is going to be a disaster, Senator."

"I'm afraid it may be." Actually, it *would* be. Tarkin had been studying up on Grievous. Murderous madman that he was, the cyborg came from a war-torn planet and had been once associated with one of its greatest warlords. Who Grievous had been before his transformation was a mystery, but Tarkin was certain that whoever he was, he'd been aboard the shuttle that warlord had died in. The Kaleesh claimed the Jedi bombed the shuttle, unlikely as that was. They still had a grudge with the Jedi and the Republic, even now a Republic army was assisting the Yam'rii in subjugating the unruly savages.

But the Kaleesh, like Grievous, were a people who had spent their entire lives battling enemies, in a galaxy that knew for the most part, only peace until the Separatist Crisis. Grievous had long ago learned how to wage the kinds of wars that had previously only been acted out on game tables and holonet forums in civilized space. He was not to be underestimated, no matter how many times the media called him a simple-minded brute.

Luckily for the Republic, men like Wilhuff Tarkin were on hand and ready to lead. Men who had prepared their whole lives for a war like this one. Grievous would meet his match in him... if the Republic could survive three and a half more months of Mas Amedda.

"Alright, R-8, take her up," Esera said into her comlink. *Scimitar*'s thrusters roared as the ship slowly lifted out of Murshida's garden, and drifted through the air to an empty patch of ground a few dozen meters away. "Perfect. Land her there, I'm coming aboard."

Back in the cabin, Esera looked at the cloaking device diagnostic. Everything was green, she had no reason to believe it wouldn't work. For the next few hours, Esera contemplated how she was going to deal with Aspar's imminent arrival. She'd already taken the tracking device two kilometers away from the Skakoan's home, in case Aspar just shot at it from orbit. Leaving now was a viable option, but then the Republic might show up and make the same assumption she made: that all Skakoans were Separatists. Murshida hadn't even known there was a Separatist Crisis, let alone a war, he had nothing to do with it. *But try being reasonable with any Jedi these days,* Esera thought, entering into a dark mood. No one listened to each other anymore.

When she saw Murshida plodding along the ridge back towards his home, Esera had an idea. "R8, flash our landing lights, get his attention." R8 beeped, and obeyed. "Now, activate the cloak." All the lights in the cabin dimmed, and *Scimitar* seemed to groan with satisfaction. This was what the ship was made to do, after all.

Murshida gave a start, and hurried over. Esera surprised him by lowering the ramp, which surely looked like it was coming out of thin air. "How do you like the cloaking device?" asked Esera.

"Amazing!" the Skakoan gasped. He put this hand on the hull, invisible to his eyes, but very much still there. "A cloaking device? On a ship this small?"

"This is a very special ship," said Esera.

"We would have a field day with this, back home," said Murshida.

"I know someone who would have a field day with this too," Esera said, thinking of Lieutenant Voyan. "But we have a problem, Murshida."

"Oh?"

Esera told him about the tracking device, and that a Jedi named Ardabur Aspar would be arriving to apprehend her, or simply kill her, soon. In the Force, Esera felt the Skakoan's concern. "We were trained on how to fight Jedi, in the Cyber Guard," he said. "But that was a long, long time ago, for me."

"Why fight him?" asked Esera. "If leaving now would keep you safe, I'd do it. But you're a Skakoan, and Skakoans are regarded as a hostile species by the Republic. If I leave, and they arrest you, well... I'd feel guilty. I feel guilty right now, for bringing this trouble to you."

"Providence brought me here, and providence will take me from here," said Murshida. "All things must come to an end, sooner or later."

"You really do sound like a Jedi."

"If you're an enemy of the Jedi, you must know them," Murshida said.

"Yeah... About that..." Esera revealed her lightsaber hilt, and levitated it above her open palm.

"Oh." The Skakoan was silent for a few moments, his dirty red robe swaying in the gentle breeze. "This is more complicated than I assumed, Captain Komara. You do not have the look or attitude I expected of a Jedi."

"They expelled me from the Order, for saving innocent lives," Esera said. "I don't want to be even remotely associated with them."

Murshida nodded his head, and looked over to his home. "You are a guest here, Captain. A guest who is good of heart. Therefore you are under my protection, no matter who comes for your head. I will fight with you, if I must. But I must insist we seek a non-violent solution first."

"That's..." Esera stopped herself. *He doesn't know Aspar like I do.* "We can try, but I wouldn't get my hopes up. The Jedi Order forgot how to be peacemakers a long time ago."

"I am sorry to hear that."

The two prepared a plan. As daybreak neared, Murshida prepared for battle, dusting off his old Cyber Guard equipment. Esera still had no idea who they were, but Murshida was ready to face a Jedi without any fear, so she supposed they were serious business. Meanwhile, she prepared *Scimitar*'s cloak and aimed the ship's scanners at the sky, ready to go dark the moment a Star Destroyer entered orbit. Esera was not ready to fight Aspar. She wasn't even ready to fight clones. The wound she'd received from Aspar had been shallow enough to miss her heart by several centimeters, but bacta patches were not conductive for quick movements, and Esera didn't want to open up the healing wound by jumping around and dodging. First her hand, now her chest, would nothing be preserved to her?

How am I going to get out of this without fighting Aspar, that's the real question I need to be asking. Again, the thought of just leaving occurred to her, but Esera knew the responsible thing to do was stay here until she was certain of her host and savior's fate. Jedi did not repay the kindness of strangers with cowardice.

At dawn, Murshida emerged from his starship-home. The dirty old red robe was gone, replaced by a spotless crimson one, and he seemed now to be even bulkier than before. Esera saw silver armor, and there was definitely something attached to his left arm. He carried a polearm of some sorts, a long haft topped with a curved blade that could be an ax or a spear if he chose to use it so. *It must be some kind of vibro-weapon,* Esera thought. There was a blunt hammer-like head on the other side of the haft from the blade, too. As usual, Murshida remained hooded, though there was something boxy on his back.

"Extra air," he told Esera. "You may be the first alien to ever see one of the Cyber Guard in action, and live to tell the tale," said Murshida, planting his weapon in the ground.

"I've never even heard of you guys before."

"Skakoans are not ones to advertise our abilities. But as you made no mention of my planet in this war, I can only assume the Republic has not tried to take it by force."

"It hasn't," Esera said. "Their ships only come into the outer system to spy and cause trouble, they won't go past the outer gas giants."

"I am not surprised." Murshida radiated a feeling of pride and satisfaction. What wondrous weapons defended Skako, he would not say.

"I can't convince you to come with me right now, can I?" asked Esera.

"I will not leave me home if I do not have to."

No, he wouldn't be coming with unless things got bad. Which they were going to. Just being a Skakoan was becoming a crime in the Republic. Esera sighed. "I'm not going to be much use in a fight, with these patches across me."

"There may be a way around that," said Murshida. He looked out over the dreary sunlit valley. "I have... been more humble than I perhaps ought to be."

"Humble? About what?"

"There have been instances, over the last decade or so, where I have been able to..." Murshida paused again, shaking his head. "I have been able to do what I can only call a miracle. When I am aligned with the universal energy I spoke of before, I am able to heal things that should not be so easily healed."

"Oh, so you used the Force to heal people," Esera said. "You must be subconsciously sensitive to it."

"The Force?"

Esera had to explain that, too; Murshida was not a crazy hermit who'd duped himself into believing the universe had objective truth, he was in fact touching something very real in his moments of inner clarity. The Skakoan was taken aback. "You say this like it's ordinary! To perform such miracles... is something you have seen commonly?"

"The Force is alive, Murshida," Esera said. "With focus, you can use the Force to regenerate other living things. You've done it before, clearly, you just didn't know what it was."

Murshida's world was tipped upside down, but he didn't have time to dwell on that, and he knew it. "Very well. Even at seventy-two years of age, I still know nothing about the universe, apparently. I propose I work such a miracle on you, Captain Komara."

"Alright," said Esera. "Force healing has never been my specialty..." In fact, nothing was her specialty, she failed at everything she tried, it seemed like. But she wasn't going to tell Murshida that on the eve of battle. "I can try to walk you through how we Jedi do it."

"No," Murshida said. "I will do it my way."

This meant Murshida was going to have to put his hands over her wound. The knowledge that her Skakoan ally had no carnal interest in her, and indeed was too old to even have such an interest, was slightly reassuring. They entered *Scimitar*'s lower cabin deck so that she didn't have to wear a pressure suit. Esera remained uncomfortable nonetheless as Murshida entered his trance and placed his armored hands on the long burn that stretched up and down her chest. For a while, nothing happened, and Esera laid still. But over time, she started to realize that there was a warm feeling spreading up and down the slash Aspar's saber had left on her. Not just a warm feeling, but a light began to shine through the bacta patches and her shirt. Around them, the dark side recoiled, and the Force bloomed to life.

The Skakoan sat up, and removed his hands, his body moving back and forth as he breathed. "It is done," he said, breathless.

"Thank you," said Esera, though those words seemed too small for what she wanted to express. A visit to the washroom revealed that the wound was entirely healed up. The only trace anything had ever been there was a faint, fine white line, almost invisible on her pale skin. Were it not for the remaining stiffness of her muscles there, she wouldn't have thought twice about it. "Amazing!" Esera told Murshida. "If the Jedi had found you, you probably could have become a respected healer in the Service Corps."

"I think I'd die if I did this too often," Murshida said. He pushed himself to his feet with a groan. "I do not have the energy I once did."

"Rest a while," Esera said. "You're going to need it."

While Murshida took it easy in his home, Esera contemplated her two serious wounds. Ahsoka Tano had taken her hand, Esera had been touching the dark side; now her right hand would never be the same. Even now, it would still twitch on its own, and had difficulty grasping things. Aspar had nearly killed her, but she'd resisted temptation, and the Force had brought her to a healer that made her almost as good as new. *The dark side always takes more than it gives,* she thought. This was no grand revelation, but it was a lesson she'd never forget.

Only a few hours later, the sensors went off. Aspar's Star Destroyer had arrived in the system. Esera cloaked *Scimitar*, and waited with baited breath. Her ill-fitting pressure suit would not work in combat, she'd only have a few minutes to deal with Aspar before nitrogen narcosis took her again. So would Aspar, though, if he made the same mistake she did. Two gunships were descending into the atmosphere. Outside, Murshida sat on a bench in the shadow of his home, vibro-ax leaning against the hull of what once had been a ship.

Aspar's going to be mad, Esera thought. Sincerely, she hoped R8's impromptu flamethrower had crippled him, and that only clone troopers would be descending. But R8 had been at the top of the ramp, she'd been at the bottom, and Aspar had been standing at her feet, placing him at least four meters from the droid. R8's improvised weapon probably wasn't lethal at that range. *I should expect Aspar, then,* Esera decided, *and plan for him to be at full combat readiness.*

The two gunships came into visual range, small dots high on the sky, and dropping fast. *Scimitar* remained cloaked, while Esera watched them from the viewport. They went straight for Murshida's house, depositing a squad of troops and her Jedi foe, as she'd feared. Aspar's armor was scorched and sooty, his head wrapped entirely in bandages, but for his eyes and mouth. *Oh, maybe R8 did get him better than I expected,* Esera thought. The dark side presence in *Scimitar* was masking his presence from her, hopefully it'd mask her presence from him. Esera switched on the camera and microphone feed from Murshida.

"Where is she?" Aspar demanded, as he strode up to the Skakoan.

"She was in my garden, and now she's gone. I'm afraid I can't help you any more than that," said Murshida, remaining seated on his bench. "Who are you?"

The clones were making their perimeter, a few came dangerously close to *Scimitar*, not knowing there was a ship only a few meters behind them. Aspar glowered at the Skakoan. "Maybe that's what I should be asking you?" he answered. "I see that pressure suit under those robes. You're a Skakoan."

"Yes," said Murshida.

"So, what's a Skakoan doing all the way out here, conveniently on the same planet as a fugitive Dark Jedi?"

"I live here," said Murshida, gesturing to his home at his back. "I have lived here longer than you have been alive, in peace and quiet. I have no part in your war."

"There's no reason for a Skakoan to be here unless he were attempting to rendezvous with a Separatist," Aspar said. His eyes narrowed, and Esera noticed how red his skin looked. "Such as the Separatist who fled Naboo two days ago, the one we tracked here. The one who, according to the tracker, landed right here!"

"Yes, a ship landed here two days ago, in my garden," Murshida said. "There was a Human woman aboard, who told me about the war, and then took her ship out of my garden."

He's not being dishonest, Aspar might not be able to sense deception in him, thought Esera.

"So, you admit she was here," said Aspar.

"Yes, like I said already," Murshida said. "But she's not in my garden anymore. I've told you all I can, will that be all?"

"No, I don't think it will." Aspar took his lightsaber off his belt, and the clones raised their guns. "We'll be taking you in for further questioning."

"I have told you everything I know."

"I don't think you have. You're coming with us."

"By what right?"

That question did not please Aspar in the slightest. "By what right? The only right that matters: the law!" He activated his comlink. "Pilot, blast that piece of junk."

A missile shot out from one of the gunships, arcing high into the sky, and piercing through Murshida's ship's roof. The methane inside ignited, and a pillar of flame came roaring out through the hole, until the entire ship sagged in on itself and crumpled, no longer supported by the atmospheric pressure within. The Skakoan stared at what had become of his home for half his life, and put his hand on his vibro-ax.

"So, that's how we're settling this," Murshida said. "You were right about one thing, Komara. A non-violent solution is not possible with this boy."

"I knew it! She's here!" roared Aspar. "Where are you, Komara!? Show yourself, you coward! You traitor!"

I'm up, thought Esera. She went down a deck, and opened the ramp, giving the clone troopers a fright as the air itself opened up. Anakin Skywalker or Ahsoka Tano might have had something to witty to say, at such a moment, but nothing came to Esera's mind. She simply stood at the foot of *Scimitar*, lightsaber out. Already, the high pressure air was making her ears ring. *I only have a few minutes to make something happen.*

"You're mine, Komara! Troopers, kill the Skakoan."

"Belay that order!" Murshida shouted, so sharply and quickly the clones actually hesitated as their military conditioning kicked in. "I have no wish to fight you, Republic soldiers, but I will-"

The clone troopers opened up on Murshida, and like lightning, he jumped forward, vibro-ax taking the first clone's head off. The Skakoan stretched out his left arm, and the barrel of a blaster sprang out. He returned fire as he weaved and ducked between the clones, like a red specter of death. Not one bolt that hit him slowed him down. Each punch he threw twisted its target's head around so quickly their neck snapped, each kick he delivered crushed lung cavities, leaving troopers gasping for breath on the ground. His ax smashed through armor and flesh with equal ease, and his blaster always found its mark. Aspar watched in disbelief as his troopers were butchered.

"Skakoan Cyber Guard," Esera said, turning on her lightsaber. "He didn't want to fight, but you forced his hand."

"As if I care that some expendable lives were expended," Aspar growled, bearing down on Esera. "It's just you and me now, traitor."

Aspar attacked without grace or elegance, lunging for her, but Esera just stepped aside. The Jedi's moves were clumsy and uncoordinated, the nitrogen narcosis was already taking effect. Esera too was feeling it, her head was spinning and she didn't feel in danger at all, despite how close Aspar was coming to hitting her. The two dueled on, like a pair of padawans, tripping over their own feet and leaving openings that the other could have exploited, were it not for their impaired judgment and delayed reactions.

The last of the clones had been disabled, killed or crippled, and Murshida joined their fray. He alone was not reduced to a drunken haze from the compressed gases interfering with his nervous system. Aspar swung his lightsaber at the Skakoan, who raised his vibroaxe to block it. Aspar's lightsaber slammed into it, and flickered off. He stared in confused at the dead lightsaber hilt in his hands.

"Cortosis weave, son," Murshida said. Aspar jumped backwards, fury in his eyes,

"Work, damn you, work!" he hissed, as he thumbed the igniter again and again until the blue blade leaped out once more. Esera stumbled after the Skakoan, who slowly approached Aspar with all the inevitability of time itself, ax at the ready. Aspar threw out his hand and tried to push Murshida back, but the Skakoan dug his heels into the ground, servos and pistons whining against the Force blast.

Esera came at Aspar from the side, and he parried sluggishly; her blade slipped down and nicked him under the ribs. He hissed in pain, and the wild look in his eyes only grew. "What dark side sorcery have you concocted?" Aspar asked her.

"A high pressure atmosphere," said Esera. She made to attack again, but stumbled, and Aspar's blade took off a centimeter of her hair.

"Devious," Aspar growled, once he made the connection. "You knew we'd both be effected, that's why you used the Skakoan as a shield!"

The ring of shadow was starting to close in on Esera's vision, leaving her blind in her peripherals. "He really didn't want to kill anyone," she said.

"This is war, you stupid little girl! That's what's supposed to happen!" Aspar yelled. "Why could you never understand that? Why were you always such a whiny softhearted craven? I spit on Olor Callo's grave for training such a useless, weak, cowardly traitor! People like you are the reason this war happened! You aren't strong enough to do what needs to be done!"

"*Me?*" Esera was incredulous. "It's the fault of people like you, too proud and arrogant to ever open your ears for once your damn life and listen! You're the ones who started this war by answering a call for justice with violence! So full of yourselves that you decided you'd rather plunge this galaxy into chaos than ever admit you might be wrong in your allegiances!"

"Enough," Murshida said, appearing in Esera's limited vision suddenly. He hit Aspar in the chest with the end of the vibro-ax haft, knocking him to the ground. Aspar rolled, and managed to get on his feet again, and ran at Esera with single-minded determination, letting out a wordless shout of rage. Just as their fight had begun, Esera sidestepped him. But this time, he turned too slow, raised his blade too late, and she stabbed him through the chest.

"You..!" Aspar gasped, before Esera turned off her blade and let him fall to the ground. He lay there, wheezing, staring up at the sky.

Murshida approached. "It would be smart to finish him."

"Uh..." Esera knew killing Aspar now would save a world of trouble later. *But I can't kill a disarmed enemy,* she thought. *And I can't bring him aboard* Scimitar*, he'd recover his wits instantly, wounded or not. The dark side is powerful enough he might succumb to it in this state... So I have to kill him or leave him. I'm only here because I did what was right when no one else would. If I stop now, would I be any better than him?*

"I know what you're thinking," Murshida said. "If you cannot do it, I will. I have no love of violence, but if we let him live, we will suffer for it. He has a singular hatred for you, I can almost feel it. This will not be the last time he comes to kill you."

"You're right," Esera said, putting a hand on her head and trying to collect her increasingly scattered thoughts. "But we shouldn't. It's not the Jedi way."

"They expelled you."

"This is more than that! Master Callo would have never done this, I- I owe it to him, never to be less than- less than-" Esera lost her balance, and fell. She tried to keep speaking but couldn't find the words, and she could barely see at all between the tunnel vision and sudden tears in her eyes.

Murshida sighed, very loudly. "I am going to regret this." He picked up Esera with one arm, and carried her into *Scimitar*, blasting a wounded clone's gun out of his hand as he tried to take a shot at them. Once inside, the air pressure began to return to normal, and the nitrogen narcosis vanished. Esera and Murshida went up to the flight deck, where R8 was waiting.

"Take us to Raxus," she said, sitting in the pilot's seat.

R8 beeped, and the engines began to power up. Esera wondered why the gunships weren't shooting – the pilots and gunners looked like they'd passed out. Behind her, Murshida fell into one of the seats, groaning as he did. "My painkillers are running out, Komara, I can feel my joints again," he said. "I'm too old for this."

"Sorry," Esera said, as *Scimitar* lifted off. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Do you think this ship has medicine for arthritis?" asked the Skakoan.

"Um, probably not."

"A shame," sighed Murshida. He seemed to be shaking inside his armor. "I will miss that planet. The best years of my life were spent there. But destiny has called me to a new course, and I will answer it. I am happy I could save your life." While *Scimitar* left the planet under a cloak, several Republic gunships passed them, heading down to rescue their general and comrades. Aspar would live, that was for sure.

"So am I," Esera said. "Cyber Guard, huh?"

"I am one with my armor," Murshida said. He leaned back in his seat, eyes still glowing green under his hood. "Cyber is short for cybernetic. This exoskeleton plugs into me at thirty seven different points. They trained me for twenty-five years to do what you saw out there. I didn't stop practicing in all my decades away from home. Remember your training, and you'll make it out alive, they said... Well, here I am. I can't say my knees made it out alive, though..." The Skakoan was sounding very sleepy.

"Take it easy, old man," Esera said. "I've got us covered from here."

But her passenger had one last thing to say. "Captain Komara?"

"Yeah?"

"I think it was a mistake to let Aspar live."

"From a purely logical point of view, yes. He'll be coming to kill me again, this is personal now. And I'm just not strong enough to fight him," said Esera. She stared out into space for a moment, trying to put her feelings into words. "But... I was taught to do the right thing, even when it was the most difficult thing to do. That is the way of the Jedi, the real Jedi. Even if I'm the last real Jedi there is, I won't become another butcher like Aspar is. Never. The whole galaxy can call me a weak, sentimental fool all they like. I'm not giving up what I believe in. It's all I've got left."

Murshida nodded once. "He was right, to say you're softhearted. That is not a weakness, Esera Komara. You are foolish, maybe. Sentimental, certainly. But you are not weak. Not with faith like yours."

"Thank you," said Esera, in a quiet voice. The green glowing eyes under the Skakoan's hood dimmed into darkness, and he settled into the chair. Within minutes, he was snoring through his suit's vocoder. Esera couldn't help but smile.

Author's behind the scenes fun facts note: I'm sorry folks, 11-12K words is just how all my chapters are turning out to be lately. So, we've met another character! This is Khan's very first form. Yes, you read that right. Super tactical droid Khan was originally a Skakoan cybernetic warrior who did mad science and antagonized Esera (he became the droid and took the name Khan very early in 2019). The concept was too much fun not to use, though, and I found my chance to bring him back as the mystic/healer Esera meets when I outlined this arc a while ago. The Skakoans having a religious bent was something ASD alludes to all the way back in chapter 5, so making the mystic/healer a Skakoan fit very well.

Another thing, just because I put thought into it and need to tell it to you guys. Murshida's planet's locals were going to be bio-luminescent tripedal starfish dudes with muskets and lances, riding bio-luminescent quintepedal starfish horses. However, every time I introduced them, they broke the flow of the narrative, and in the end I cut them from the story, RIP. That's all from me, see you next week.

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